



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

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The Alarming Rise of Anti-Semitism, Is Christianity next?

By Henk Askes

As a young boy growing up in a Christian home in the Netherlands, I was taught that the Jewish people were the chosen people of God. Although it is almost 60 years ago, I vividly remember an incident in 1944 when I was ten years old. At the time, our country was occupied by the German military. My father and I had been trying (illegally) to get some wood from a nearby railway station for our stove, as it was bitterly cold.

A German soldier with a shiny helmet stood in a deserted street and shouted something like: “werda, wer ist da?” (Who is there?) to a Jewish girl. He apparently thought she would run away, so he took out his Luger and shot her point-blank. She was wearing the Star of David badge all Jews were required to display.

When the girl collapsed and died, I couldn't understand how anybody could do a thing like that. Can any race hate another race so much? At that time I hadn't yet learned of the claims of the so-called Aryan race that Jews belonged to a sub-human race.

My parents, and other Dutch people in Utrecht, played a leading role in hiding Jewish women and children. I thought it was wonderful we were able to save those people from the hands of the enemy. Our parents trained us to say that we knew nothing about people being hidden away when German soldiers interrogated us.

Increase in European Anti-Semitism

Today, in the early years of this 21st century, Europe has once again become the epicenter of anti-Semitism.

World Jewish leaders report that the level of anti-Semitic attacks in Europe is the worst since World War II. If, in casual conversation, one sides with an Israeli position, one will find oneself as an unsupported and unappreciated minority. Europeans at large abhor discrimination of all kinds—with the exceptions being the Jews and, increasingly, Christians.

Why has this abhorrence of Jewish people increased in Europe and, in fact, over the whole world? Anti-Semitism is the oldest hatred in history and has, in fact, always been present in European life.

Anti-Semitism has a long and sordid history. K.H. Miskotte wrote in 1933: “Anti-Semitism is, in fact, nothing else but a boundless, for too long concealed hate against the God of the Torah who is also the God of the Church.” The roots of anti-Semitism are spiritual.

Examples of Escalating Hatred in Europe:

In Belgium:

Most of the anti-Jewish activity originates within the Muslim community. Other significant Belgian sources of activity are the radical right and Holocaust deniers. The flamboyant Belgian, Dyab Abu Jahjah, is playing a major role as the voice of the Arabic awakening. His followers often shout: *Hamas, hamas, all Jews into gas*. Jahjah's vision includes the end of Israel as an independent nation. Jahjah is connected with the Hezbollah in Lebanon and regards the current leader of Israel, Ariel Sharon, as a deranged assassin. Jahjah is preparing to run for the Brussels city council in 2006.

In the Netherlands:

Gretta Duisenberg, wife of the president of the European Central Bank, is obsessed with her “mission.” Gretta is pleading for economic and financial sanctions against Israel. She aroused a wave of criticism from the Jewish population in the Netherlands by deliberately hanging a Palestinian flag across her balcony for six weeks. She recently remarked: “The Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas is worse than the occupation of the Netherlands by Germany.” She has collected money in Amsterdam for the Arabian Al Aqsa-Foundation, which gives support to Palestinian suicide terrorists. She smugly said that she needed “6 million signatures” for her cause.

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In France:

French Jews no longer feel safe. They hide their religion and emigrate to Israel, says Joseph Farah in *World NetDaily*. One 20-year-old émigré identified only as Julie, was quoted by *Le Monde* newspaper saying she had decided to emigrate after being attacked with two friends who were wearing kippas. "Up to now, we were proud to be French. Not any more. Now we are proud to be Jewish," she said.

There is a growing hatred of Jews at French public schools. Last year 450 racist and anti-semitic incidents were reported against Jews and synagogues. France has the largest Jewish population in Europe —600,000. However, the Jewish population in France is dwarfed by the Muslim population of 6 million second only to Roman Catholicism. Many Jews are wondering whether France is safe.

Jewish teens wearing yarmulkes have been attacked on the street. Extraordinary safety precautions take place before synagogue services in some cities, including Paris. Just before Rosh Hashanah, 200 Arabs attacked Jews on the Champs Elysee. Gunmen fired on a kosher butcher and his shop in Toulouse. A Jewish couple in their twenties were beaten up by five men in Villeurbanne. A Jewish school was vandalized in Sarcelles.

Ohana, a Jewish girl, wears a Hebrew letter on a gold chain around her neck. Lately, she said, she keeps it tucked inside her collar. She says, "We're starting to hide that we're Jewish."

In Germany and Austria:

Synagogues have been attacked in Berlin and Herford in western Germany. Jews have reportedly been attacked because they were wearing the Star of David. Berlin police have informally advised Jews to avoid wearing skullcaps after recent anti-Semitic attacks in the German capital. Most significantly, armed police guard Jewish sites in Berlin. Barricades surround buildings such as the historic New Synagogue.

In England:

There has been a considerable rise in organized anti-Semitism, particularly of the Islamic kind, officials at Israel's Embassy in London report. Activists are sending e-mails and letters to members of both houses of

Parliament, condemning Israel and the Jews. Anti-Israel demonstrations take place on a regular basis. During an average month, there are 20 anti-Semitic incidents in England.

Columnist Petronella Wyatt observed in the *Spectator* magazine "anti-Semitism and its open expression has become respectable at London dinner tables."

The Role of the Media

There is clear prejudice in the media against Israel. Dr. Dvir Abramovich states in *The Beast that Refuses to Die: The Rise of Anti-Semitism in Europe and the Role of the Media* that journalists and commentators have contributed to a climate that has made violence against Jews a common phenomenon. *The London Evening Standard* recently claimed that the State of Israel no longer has a right to exist and the Israeli army is poisoning water supplies in the West Bank.

A media rush to judgment against Jews and Israel is demonstrated by the story of the 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Mohammed Adura. Through the irresponsible conduct of his father, this boy was ex-posed to Israeli army fire during an exchange with Palestinian gunmen. For days the media reported and broadcast the death of Mohammed Adura as the work of Jewish soldiers. When it was finally determined that Palestinians had killed the boy, the story was simply dropped without further comment or explanation.

A new anti-Christian and secular European culture has thrown Christian values and norms over-board. This is disturbingly evident in school. My own experience in teaching part-time is confirming this. It is shocking to hear from young people who were brought up in Christian homes, for whom the Bible and the message of salvation has no appeal at all. In all of the anti-Semitism we must pose the question: Are Christians next?

Karl Barth once said: "The continued existence of Jewish people, despite over two millennia of man's attempted destruction, is the only concrete evidence that God has any veracity."

Verbal abuse, physical assaults and attacks on any ethnic or religious group must be condemned. I fear that a second Holocaust, when Jews in Europe and America are killed merely for being Jews, is no longer impossible.

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has authored or co-authored over 35 books, as well as numerous articles

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Cool Stuff About Love and Sex

By Rusty Wright

Psst! Hey, kids! Want to read some really cool stuff about love and sex that you might never hear from your parents? Read on! (But skip the next paragraph.)

Hey, parents! Want to learn how to talk to your kids about sex in a way they will understand and relate to? Read on.¹

“A fulfilling love life. How can I have one? How can I get the most out of sex?” University students worldwide ask these questions. As I’ve spoken on their campuses, I’ve tried to offer some practical principles because I believe both pleasure and emotional fulfillment are important facets of sex. These principles relate to teens too, teens of all ages.

Sex is often on our minds. According to two psychologists at the universities of Vermont and South Carolina, 95 percent of people think about sex at least once each day.² You might wonder, “You mean that five percent of the people *don’t*?”

Why does sex exist?

One of the main purposes of sex is pleasure. Consider what one wise man named Solomon wrote. He said:

*Drink water from your own cistern
And fresh water from your own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone
And not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times,*

*Be exhilarated always with her love
(Proverbs 5:15-19 NASB).*

Solomon’s ancient love sonnet, the “Song of Solomon,” is one of the best sex manuals ever written and traces the beauty of a sexual relationship in marriage. It gets pretty hot and juicy, so be careful where you are when you read it. (Would it surprise you to know that it’s in the Bible?)

Another purpose of sex is to develop oneness or unity. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24 NASB).

A third purpose for sex is procreation. That, of course, is how we all got here.

How to Have a Most Fulfilling Love Life

One-way not to have a fulfilling love life is to concentrate solely on sexual technique. There is certainly nothing wrong with learning sexual technique—especially the basics— but technique by itself is not the answer.

The qualities that contribute to a successful sex life are the same ones that contribute to a successful interpersonal relationship. Qualities like love, commitment and communication.

Consider love. As popular speaker and author Josh McDowell points out, those romantic words, “I love you,” can be interpreted several different ways. One meaning is “I love you *ř*—if you go out with me...if you are lighthearted...if you sleep with me.” Another meaning is “I love you

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because—because you are attractive...strong...intelligent.” Both types of love must be earned. The best kind of love is unconditional. It says, “I love you, *period*. I love you even if someone better looking comes along, even if you change, even if you have zoo breath in the morning. I place your needs above my own.” One young engaged couple had popularity, intelligence, good looks and athletic success that seemed to portend a bright future. Then the young woman suffered a skiing accident that left her paralyzed for life. Her fiancé deserted her. Portrayed in the popular film, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, this true story was certainly complex. But was his love for her “love, period”? Or was it love “if” or love “because”? Unconditional love (or “less-conditional” because none of us is perfect) is an essential building block for a lasting relationship. Unconditional love with caring and acceptance can help a sexual relationship in a marriage. Sex, viewed in this manner, becomes not a self-centered performance but a significant expression of mutual love. Commitment is also important for a strong relationship and fulfilling sex. Without mutual commitment, neither partner will be able to have the maximum confidence that the relationship is secure. Good communication is essential. If a problem arises, couples need to talk it out and forgive rather than stew in their juices. As one sociology professor expressed it, “Sexual foreplay involves the ‘round-the-clock relationship.’”

Why Wait?

After I’d spoken in a human sexuality class at Arizona State University, one student said, “You’re talking about sex within marriage. What about premarital sex?” He was right. I was saying that sexual intercourse is designed to work best in a happy marriage, and I was recommending waiting until marriage before experiencing sex.

This view is, of course, very controversial. You may agree with me. Or you may think I am from another planet, and I respect your right to feel that way. Here’s why I waited.

According to the perspective I represent, the biblical God clearly says to wait (1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). Some people think that God wants to make them miserable. Actually, he loves us and wants the best for us. There are practical reasons for waiting.

- Premarital sex can detract from a strong relationship and a fulfilling love life. Too often,

it’s merely a self-gratifying experience. After intercourse, one partner might be saying, “I love you” while the other is thinking, “I love it.”

- Premarital sex often lacks total, permanent commitment. This can create insecurity. For instance, while the couple is unmarried, the nagging thought can persist, “If she/he’s slept with me, who else have they slept with?” After they marry, one might think, “If they were willing to break a standard with me before we married, will they with another after we marry?” Doubt can chip away at their relationship.
- Premarital sex can also inhibit communication. Each might wonder, “How do I compare with my lover’s other partners? Does she/he tell them how I perform in bed?” Each may become less open; communication can deteriorate and so can the relationship.
- Premarital sex can lessen people’s chances to experience maximum oneness and pleasure. “I really like what you said about waiting,” said a recently married young woman after a lecture at Sydney University in Australia. “My fiancé and I had to make the decision, and we decided to wait.” (Each had been sexually active in other previous relationships.) “With all the other tensions, decisions and stress of engagement, sex would have been just another worry. Waiting till our marriage before we had sex was the best decision we ever made.”

The Vital Dimension Powerful emotional factors can make it difficult for teens to wait or to stop. A longing to be close to someone or a yearning to express love can generate intense desires for physical intimacy. Many singles today want to wait but lack inner strength or self-esteem. They may fear losing love if they postpone sex.

Often sex brings emptiness rather than the wholeness people seek through it. As one TV producer told me, “Frankly, I think the sexual revolution has backfired in our faces. It’s degrading to be treated like a piece of meat.” The previous night her lover had justified his decision to sleep around by telling her, “There’s plenty of me for everyone.” What I suspect he meant was, “There’s plenty of everyone for me.” She felt betrayed and alone.

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I explained to her and to her TV audience that sexuality also involves the spiritual. One wise spiritual teacher understood our loneliness and longings for love. He recognized human emotional needs for esteem, acceptance and wholeness and offered a plan to meet them. He promises unconditional love to all who ask (John 3:16, 13:34-35, 17:20, 23, 26; 1 John 4:7-21, 5:14-15). Once we know we're loved and accepted, we can have greater security to be vulnerable in relationships and new inner strength to make wise choices for safe living (Acts 1:8; Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:16-24; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

This teacher said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32 NASB). Millions attest to the safety and security he can provide in relationships. His name, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth. I placed my faith in him personally my freshman year in college. Though I had been a skeptic, he forgave all my flaws. He said his own death and resurrection—once I accepted his pardon—erased my guilt (Luke 24:44-47; Colossians 2:12-14). That was great news!

Marriage with Jesus involved can be like a triangle with God on the top and the two spouses at the bottom corners. As each partner grows closer to God, they also grow closer to each other. Life doesn't become perfect, but God's friendship can bring a vital dimension to any relationship.

Parents and Kids

A nationwide survey of teens asked the question, "When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential?" Forty-nine percent of teens responding said it was their parents. The next closest response was "friends" (16 per-cent). Eleven percent said the media influenced their decisions about sex the most. Only five per-cent said it was their romantic partner.³ Lots of your peers think that it is important to consider how their parents feel about sex.

Teens also feel that talking with their parents about sex can make important sexual decisions easier. In a subsequent national survey, teens overwhelmingly expressed that they could more easily post-pone sexual activity and avoid getting pregnant if they could only talk about these matters more openly with their folks.⁴

But there's a problem. Too many parents are unaware how important their values about sex are to their teens. Parents often think that their teenager's friends are the strongest influence on their teen's decisions about sex. Yet teens don't consider their friends as being nearly as influential as parents think they are.⁵

And mom, you are really, really important!

A major report based on two University of Minnesota studies involving national data found that teens having close relationships with their mothers are more likely to delay first intercourse than teens lacking close relationships with their mothers. The report authors note, "previous studies have shown that mothers tend to have a greater influence than fathers on teens' sexual decision-making."⁶

What can a parent do to help their teens develop positive, healthy sexual attitudes and behavior? Here are some ideas:

- Develop close, loving relationships with your kids from the time they are young.
- Model the types of behavior and attitudes you wish them to emulate.
- Listen to them and treat them with respect.
- Talk about sex, your own values and why you hold them.
- Help your teens think through their life goals, including education and how teenage sexual activity might affect their dreams.
- Discuss what types of media are appropriate for your son or daughter to consume.

Making sexual decisions can be hard for teens today. Parents and teens can help each other by becoming close friends and by communicating. It's not always easy, but the rewards can be significant.

1. *Parts of this article are adapted from Rusty Wright, "Dynamic Sex: Unlocking the Secret to Love," Every Student's Choice, 1996, www.probe.org/docs/dynamicsex.html; and Rusty Wright, "Safe Sex?," Cross & Crescent LXXXI:4, Winter 1994-95, pp. 19-21, www.probe.org/rusty/docs/safesex.html.*

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2. Kathleen Kelleher, "Entertaining Fantasies? Don't Worry, Everyone's Doing It," Los Angeles Times, August 15, 1995. She cites Harold Leitenberg of the University of Vermont and Kris Henning, now at the University of South Carolina Medical School.
3. "Faithful Nation: What American Adults and Teens Think About Faith, Morals, Religion, and Teen Pregnancy," The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, September 2001, p.5; www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/pdf/keep-ing.pdf.
4. "With One Voice 2002: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy," The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, December 2002, p. 2, 26, 27; http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/data/pdf/WO V2002_fulltext.pdf.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 22-23.
6. **"Teens' Closeness With Their mothers Linked to Delay in Initiation of Sexual Activity, Study Says," Kaiser Daily Reproductive Health Report, September 5, 2002, http://www.kaisernet-work.org/daily_reports/print_report.cfm?DR_ID=13275&dr_cat=2. The words quoted are those of the Kaiser Report summary of what the University of Minnesota research authors communicated.**

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LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 10: Mark 1:29 - 34

A Lesson About Asking



By Michael Feazell

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Even Jesus needed a rest. The synagogue let out in time for the Sabbath meal at noon, and Jesus went to the home of Simon and Andrew to eat. But even in a private setting, he was ready to help those who asked him. This wasn't a "big" miracle in terms of crowds and renown. It was a private, personal, family need. The household had come to know Jesus as one who cares and helps, so they made it a point to tell him about Simon's mother-in-law having a fever.

Take it to the Lord

We don't know whether Jesus knew about Simon's mother-in-law being sick before they told him. But we do know this: as soon as they told Jesus about her, he went to her and healed her. That sounds like a good case for telling Jesus about things. Yes, there is no question that Jesus already knows what our needs are, but he wants us to learn to ask him to help us with them. The same goes for the needs of others. Jesus already knows what their needs are. But he wants us, his

people who have his Spirit in us, to ask him to help. Simon's mother didn't ask Jesus to come to her; others did.

Why should we go through the traumas and crises of life alone? In the Psalms, God gives us examples of his people taking personal fears and concerns to him. When we lay out our problems before God, we know we have been listened to, and we know we are in the hands of someone who will do for us what is right and good.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

Asking for help

When we ask Jesus to help, it shows certain things about us:

1. It shows that we know Jesus is the right one to ask.
2. It shows that we trust Jesus.
3. It shows that we care about the problems that Jesus cares about.
4. It shows that our hope is in Jesus.
5. It shows that our lives revolve around Jesus.
6. It shows that we belong to Jesus.

When we ask Jesus to help, it does certain things to us:

7. It reminds us of Jesus' power.
8. It reminds us of Jesus' love.
9. It reminds us that Jesus is in charge of everything.
10. It reminds us that Jesus knows our needs.

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11. It reminds us that Jesus wants to help us.
12. It reminds us that Jesus listens to us.
13. It reminds us that Jesus does what is right and good for us.

When answers come

As soon as Jesus healed her, Simon's mother-in-law got up and started serving others. If we were to draw a principle from this, it would be that just as Peter's mother-in-law used the strength Jesus gave her to do good things for others, so we should devote what Jesus gives us to doing good for others. She did what she could do, and we should do what we can do. It all amounts to the same thing—taking care of each other.

Anyone can ask

After sunset the crowds arrived. The news had spread about how Jesus had cast out the demon, so the town brought their sick and demon-possessed to Simon's door, and Jesus healed them.

Jesus is good regardless of who asks. It's hard to imagine that everyone in town that night was a holy, righteous haloed saint.

Capernaum was like other towns, full of regular people who were regular sinners from every walk of life. But they came anyway, sins and all, and bathed in the glory of the Son of God. Jesus didn't ask them forty questions before he healed them. He didn't get out the sacred scales and weigh their sins against their good deeds. He just healed them. That's how he is.

Redeemer of his creation. He created in love and he redeems in love. He wants everyone to come to him, because in him is the only place healing and life truly exists. That evening in Galilee, the

people of Capernaum had a taste in the here-and-now of the kingdom age to come.

Authority to help

When the Jewish exorcists and healers tried to cast out demons or heal fevers, they followed prescribed magic-like rituals, some of which are laid down in the Talmud. For example, according to William Barclay: "The Talmud actually lays down the method of dealing with it [a burning fever like that of Simon's mother-in-law]. A knife wholly made of iron was tied by a braid of hair to a thorn bush. On successive days there was repeated, first, Exodus 3:2-3; second, Exodus 3:4; and finally Exodus 3:5. Then a certain magical formula was pronounced, and thus the cure was supposed to be achieved."

Jesus amazed everyone because he didn't use any kind of ritual or incantation at all. He simply ordered demons to leave on his own authority, and they left. He simply told people to rise and walk, or touched their leprous skin, or took their hand and lifted them up and they were healed. His authority was and is the authority of the Maker and Ruler of all things.

That's why you can bring your problems to him. That's why you can trust him to do for you what is right and good. What's eating away at you right now? Why not take it to Jesus and ask him to help you?

Reflection:

1. Does Jesus perform only large miracles, or will he help you in small things?
2. What do you need to tell Jesus about?

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LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 11: Mark 1:35 - 39

A Lesson About Priorities



By Michael Fezell

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

What's important? We usually consider whatever is the most urgent to be the most important. When we need to use the bathroom, for example, that need becomes both urgent and important, something that must for the moment take priority over everything else. Many things take a priority spot in our lives. Sometimes it might be a movie or television show we've been waiting to see. It might be a trip we want to take, or a special event we want to arrange or attend. Sometimes it might be something we want to buy, maybe a new CD, a pair of jeans, a computer, a car or a house. The priority might be a relationship, a job, a project. It might be an illness, a tragedy or a difficult ordeal.

Prayer a priority

Prayer is the kind of priority that lies at the root of all the others—at the root of life itself. It's a lot like eating; if we rarely eat, our physical health will suffer. We'll be weak and sick. It will affect our ability to carry on the activities of life. In a similar way, if we rarely pray, our spiritual life will lack vitality. We'll approach the challenges and successes of life on our own, as though we're not totally dependent on God even for life itself.

Without prayer, we begin to take credit for the good things in our lives, chalking them up to our skill, knowledge, wisdom and hard work. We begin to forget that all our skill, knowledge, wisdom and hard work are gifts of God—he gave us the mind, body and circumstances of life that enabled us to have and develop those attributes.

On the other hand, without prayer, we fall into fear, anxious worry and even despair at the failures, frustrations and bad events in our lives. We become unsure of God's love for us, unsure that he stands with us in our problems. We feel alone and afraid, doubtful about our ability to cope with what life is heaping onto us. Prayer is the grease, we might say, that keeps the gears and wheels of life in good working order. Without prayer, we see ourselves as alone against the world, left to fend off the storms of life on our own wits and brawn. It is in the course of prayer that we learn to see the true state of things—that we are creatures within a creation, creatures dependent on our Maker and on all the other parts of the creation, and as such, never alone.

Hard to find time

It's a crowded, hectic world for most people. Opportunities for time alone, much less for prayer, are limited. Life has its immediate demands, its already scheduled priorities lined up to overwhelm us and keep us forever playing catch-up—jobs, classes, homework, housework, yard work, kids, church, health problems, car problems, home repairs, accidents, ants, traffic, crowds, lines, appointments and, oh yes, sleep.

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Of course, there might well be a considerable amount of time that we could devote to prayer that we use on other things—things that don't really have the kind of priority that prayer should. For example, most of us have our favourite television show, and that's fine. But how often do we find ourselves sitting in front of the television—watching shows we don't really care about—just because nobody got up and turned the infernal thing off?

We make priorities out of things we care about. It isn't that we don't care about prayer, it's just that it often seems like just one more chore on top of all the other chores, and since God doesn't cry when he doesn't get his dinner or send collection agents out to repossess the washing machine, we tend to put prayer farther down the priority list.

It might be helpful to see prayer in a different light from that of one more chore to get done before (or after) turning off the light at night. Time with God is different from other time. It refreshes and rejuvenates. It relaxes the mind and body to release to God our worries, our anger, fear and anxiety. It's a better antidote to frustration than nibbling on donuts or chocolate bars. It fills our need for intimacy better than affairs or pornography. It's a far more productive way to handle anger than exploding at our spouses and children. It lasts; those alternatives don't.

Therapy, not duty

It's easy to view prayer as a duty, an obligation. When we do that, prayer becomes hard, something to put off, a burden and pressure all by itself. What a tragedy. We'd hardly consider talking to our best friends a duty. We talk to them because we like them. It's a lift to talk to them. It helps us feel better, reminds us we're not alone in this world, and gives us strength to carry on.

It's harder with God. God's invisible. And he doesn't say much. Sometimes we wonder if he's even there at all. We have the Bible, but a book isn't the same as an oral conversation.

Talking to God takes place, you could say, in our heads, by faith, not by sight, touch or sound. We can't look God in the eye, smell him, shake his hand or pat his back. Instead, we "sense" his presence in some spiritual, unseen way. We believe. We trust. The Holy Spirit, also invisible, tasteless and odourless, communicates God's reality to us on a level other than our five physical

senses. We don't understand it; we can only experience it.

Spending this time with God is great therapy.

Therapy is remedial treatment of a bodily disorder, whether physical, emotional or psychological. When we think of prayer as much needed therapy, rather than as "our Christian duty," it puts prayer into a clearer perspective, I think. When we go through our daily, weekly, monthly routines without acknowledging God as the root and core of our lives (which he is), our attitudes, emotions, psyche, even our bodies, suffer the ill effects of trying to live as though we are self-existent—not dependent on God and his creation for our life and being.

To hand over our concerns to God, whether for ourselves or for others, reminds us that our lives and future are in God's hands. Even our past, with all its baggage of sin, selfishness and ignorance, is in God's redemptive hands. The act of acknowledging God as the loving, wise and powerful Being that he is is remedial treatment for fear, worry and frustration. It's like an expert massage, removing tension and stress from our muscles, only better. Who wouldn't like a great massage every day?

Prayer is the perfect therapy for our tense, knotted and stressed spirits, and it's free! We can take a moment for a quick spiritual "rubdown" in the form of silent prayer just about any time we want during the day. And we can set aside time for a good, long session at times that work with our schedules. Think about it: if you had a certificate for a free full-body massage every day, you'd likely find a way to work it into your schedule as often as possible—even if you had to get up before everybody else and hightail it down to the gym at 5:30 a.m. You'd do that because you know what good therapy it is and how good it makes you feel. (If you are one who doesn't like or can't tolerate massages, please forgive the analogy.)

Not a substitute for action

There is another thing we can learn from Jesus' early morning hike to a solitary place for prayer. When it's time for action, it's time for action. When your child or your spouse needs your attention, it is not the time to go off and pray. When you need to repair a faucet, or make a call, or prepare a meal, it's not the time to disappear for an hour in a closet. We can and should be able to pray any time, any place, while we go

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about our business. The time to go to a solitary place for extended prayer is a time when we don't have other duties, responsibilities and obligations.

How did Jesus do it? In the instance cited in this passage, he got up early, before the regular day's activities began. You might find that other times work better for you. The point is, see prayer as a priority that will make all your other priorities more manageable and less stressful. Let your prayer time be a time to relax, to let God's love bathe and salve your frayed nerves, your taut emotions, your exhausted and frightened heart. Let prayer time be your time to rest in God, to let him renew your strength, brighten your hope, sharpen your faith.

Has prayer slipped to the bottom of your "to do" list? Why not set aside some time today for an overdue therapy session with the Master Therapist?

For reflection:

- Does prayer seem like a chore to you? Why or why not?
- Do you have trouble thinking of things to pray about? Have you thought of sitting quietly with God as a valuable part of your prayer time?
- What are some of the ways prayer has helped you?
- How would you describe, "Answered prayer"?
- What is your favourite place for prayer?

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Bible Study

Sharing in the Life of Christ:

A study of Romans 8:1-17



By Michael Morrison

Paul's letter to the Romans has three major parts: a presentation of the gospel (chapters 1-8), the place of Israel in God's plan (chapters 9-11) and exhortations for Christian living (chapters 12-15). The chapter of our study this month comes at the end of Paul's explanation of the gospel. It is the climax, and the truths that Paul discusses are truly astonishing.

No condemnation!

The chapter begins with an astonishing statement: Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death (vs. 1-2, NIV throughout).

Because of what Christ has done, believers are not counted guilty and will not be punished. We sin, but there is no condemnation. If we didn't sin, the question of condemnation wouldn't even come up. Paul knows that we sin, so he is saying, there is no punishment for Christians even though they sin.

Hard to believe? Yes, for we know that sin deserves to be punished. Paul agrees, but the gospel announces that Christ has taken our punishment on himself. Because he paid the penalty in full, we do not need to pay it again. Christ has already received all the condemnation that we deserve, so there is no further condemnation waiting for us. If we have faith in him, if our lives are in him, we do not need to be afraid.

Why? Because Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death, set us free from the only law that could possibly condemn us. The law that says, "Those who sin shall die," no longer applies

to us, because it has been taken care of—completely. We died with Christ, and it is no longer we who sin, but the sinful nature inside of us that does it (7:17). It will die, and we who are in Christ will live eternally.

God does not want us to sin, but even if we sin, we will not be condemned if we believe in his Son (John 3:18). The law could not give us eternal life, but God could, and he did it through the death of Christ. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful humanity to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in human flesh (Rom. 8:3).

Jesus did not come to condemn sinners—he came to condemn sin. He came to punish sin, to take away its power to control us and kill us. He came to give us life, and to do it in such a way that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us (v. 4). In his life and in his death, Jesus satisfied all the demands of the law. It cannot demand anything more.

Life in the Spirit

Paul then tells us that Christians do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit (v. 4). We do not set our minds on what the sinful nature wants, but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires (v. 5). We are not perfect, but as the Spirit leads us, we think and do the things of God.

Before we came to believe, our minds were headed for death. The unconverted mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. It is rebellious and disobedient.

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Paul concludes, “Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God” (vv. 6-8). But now, we are not controlled by the sinful nature but are in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ (v. 9). The Holy Spirit lives in and guides everyone who belongs to Christ, and the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace (v. 6). If we don’t even want to live right, we do not belong to Christ.

Our old bodies are dead because of sin, and they received their wages on the cross (6:2-6). In Christ, though, we have new life—But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness (8:10). Because Christ is righteous, and we are in him, the Spirit gives us life.

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit, who lives in you (v. 11). God, who raised Jesus from the dead, will also raise us, if his Spirit is living in us. Our bodies will be raised like his—immortal, incorruptible and full of glory.

Our obligation

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation,” Paul says (v. 12). It is not to live according to the sinful nature, for if we do that, we will die (v. 13). Paul does not directly say what our obligation is, but his contrast implies that we are obliged to live according to the Spirit of God. There is no penalty for failure, Paul says in verse 1, but the obligation still remains: if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live (v. 13). We are called to serve the Spirit, not the flesh. We are commanded to serve God, not self. We are commanded to resist sin.

The old person is condemned; the new person is not. Therefore, we want to spend as much of life as we can in the new. Whatever we do according to the sinful flesh will die, but whatever we do in

obedience to God will be of eternal value. The more we kill sin and the more we obey God, the more we are really alive. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God (v. 14). If we are in Christ, the Spirit guides us into a life that pleases God.

The Spirit does not enslave us or frighten us with threats of condemnation, but gives us a secure membership in God’s family: The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children (vv. 15-16).

Since the Spirit lives in us, we can confidently call God our Father—and this has important implications. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ... (v.17). This means an assurance of salvation and an assurance of glory—but it also means that we suffer in this age, as Jesus did. ... if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

When our lives are placed in Christ, then we share in his life, both the good and the bad. We share in his sufferings, in his death, in his righteousness and in his resurrection. As God’s children, we are co-heirs with Christ, sharing in who he is and what he has done. We are united with him—forever in glory!

Questions for discussion

- If there is no condemnation for believers (v.1), should we ever have feelings of guilt? Why?
- In what way does the Spirit “control” our minds? (v. 6)
- How do we get the ability to put our misdeeds to death? (v. 13)
- When we call God “Father,” do we feel fear, or privilege? (v. 16).

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